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ABSTRACT

Interviewing techniques for recruiting teachers from the perspective of both the interviewer and the job-seeking candidate are offered. Advice for the individual being interviewed for a teaching position includes a brief discussion on the importance of credentials, transcripts, application forms and references. Pitfalls are also outlined for the interviewer (e.g., illegal questions), and suggestions are made on posing questions that will elicit the most complete and revealing responses. (JD)

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FASTBACK

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ED269365

Recruiting Superior Teachers: The Interview Process

William Goldstein

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WILLIAM GOLDSTEIN

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A consulting editor of *The Clearing House* for more than 10 years, Goldstein also has lectured widely in the United States and Canada on such topics as supervising and evaluating education personnel, improving communications and writing, and handling controversial issues.

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Recruiting Superior Teachers: The Interview Process

by
William Goldstein

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Setting the Stage

This fastback is about recruiting superior teachers. More specifically, it is about the dynamics of the interview process from the perspective of both the hiring interviewer and the job-seeking candidate. But before considering the specifics of the interview process, let us set the stage by examining the status of teachers and teacher education and the prospects for securing *superior* teachers for our classrooms.

With surging competition from foreign nations threatening our former global economic hegemony, the public schools and the teachers in them have become specimens for media biopsy. Consider the following:

> In a poll of senior executives at Fortune 1300 firms, a stunning 90 percent agreed that unless American students are required to meet higher educational standards, it will be impossible for U.S. corporations to compete with foreign countries in the future. . . . The poll found exactly 0 percent of the business leaders believed that teachers are doing an "excellent" job in elementary and secondary schools today, and only 6 percent rated their performance as "very good."
> (Robert L. Crain, "What Do Employers Really Think About the Quality of American High Schools?" *NASSP Bulletin*, April 1985, p. 61).

Or

> NINE out of TEN COLLEGE students in North Carolina FLUNKED an elementary geography test; of the 1,875 students at eight of the state's largest universities who took the test last September, 97% of the freshmen and 93% of the upper-classmen failed. Blame was placed on a lack of emphasis on geography in elementary and high schools.
> (*Bulletin of the Connecticut Association of Secondary Schools*, February 1985, p. 41)

Or

> Forty-five percent of the 3300 teacher trainees who have taken the Arizona Teacher Proficiency Exam since August have failed to pass it, compared with 35 percent before the legislature changed the passing score. . . . Of the prospective teachers who have taken the test since August, 14 percent failed the math section, 24 percent the reading, and 39 percent the grammar.
> (*Education Week*, 6 February 1985)

On the other hand,

> It was announced last week that 13 percent of them [1,357 seniors at New Jersey's teacher-training colleges] failed the general knowledge test [of the National Teacher Examination] and 4 percent failed the subject-matter exams. The State Department said that if the passing levels had been as high as in most other states, fully a third of the seniors would have been barred from school jobs this fall.
> (*New York Times*, 11 August 1985, p. E9)

Such data are replicated everywhere one turns, attesting either to academic inadequacy of programs preparing teachers or, worse, to the intellectual inadequacy of the candidates themselves. If one looks at curricula of some institutions, especially those engaged in the preparation of elementary teachers, one finds many programs barren of serious academic substance, whose graduates have majored in "education." The fact remains that people preparing to teach in elementary schools do not teach "education"; they must teach English, mathematics, science, and history without having had sustained, substantive acquaintance with these disciplines. In short, they are forced

to "peddle from empty wagons." For example, the Southern Regional Education Board found:

> Education graduates took fewer courses in the major academic disciplines and less-rigorous academic courses and accumulated more education credits than needed for certification.
> (*Education USA*, 1 July 1985, p. 331)

Such data are not isolated; in fact, they are becoming commonplace and singularly disheartening. And, of course, such bleak statistics spur self-fulfilling prophecies – the greater the shrouds of gloom the less likely teaching as a career will attract the "best and the brightest."

In addition to the low-quality pool of candidates, the problems of the teacher marketplace are exacerbated by a quantitative drought:

> The National Center for Education Statistics projects a shortage of about 11,000 teachers starting this year and growing to an estimated 18,000 in 1987, 44,000 in 1990, and 72,000 in 1992. By 1991, the demand is expected to exceed the supply of new teachers by a cumulative 278,000.
> (*ASBO Accents*, February 1985, p. 11)

And data such as these do not take into account the current plight of some school systems. For example, New York City in the summer of 1985 experienced an initial shortage of more than 4,000 teachers and resorted to plumbing such exotic sources as Israel and Spain in order to staff its schools. For the 1984-85 academic year, the state of Georgia recruited a number of teachers of mathematics from West Germany, where, ironically, there was an excess of such highly qualified personnel!

The teacher supply issue has been highlighted in the Rand report *The Coming Crisis in Education* (1984) by Linda Darling-Hammond, who states, "The nation's teaching force is changing dramatically. The current highly-educated and experienced staff is dwindling as older teachers retire and many younger teachers leave for other occupations." Furthermore, the pool of women, historically the wellspring and mainstay of public school staffing in America, is forsaking teaching as a career calling. Again from the Rand report:

One of the labor market factors having the greatest effect on the teaching profession is the growth of opportunities available to women and minorities. Women have traditionally comprised the large majority of the teaching force, and they still do. However, academically talented women, in particular, are increasingly pursuing other occupations. Between 1970 and 1980, the proportion of women receiving bachelor's degrees in education decreased by half, from 36% to 18%. By 1981, the proportion had dropped to 17%. During that decade, women's professional options expanded enormously. Women's occupational choices shifted from education, English, and the social sciences to business and commerce and health professions. The proportion of degrees granted to women also increased ten fold in the biological sciences, computer sciences, engineering, and law.

Even with all the trumpets blowing "shortage," few vacancies exist in many states where salaries are at least adequate. So many young people, justifiably, are reluctant to prepare for a career that, in general, pays poorly even where jobs are available.

The foregoing, then, is the backdrop for those who are seeking to enter the profession and for those who are recruiting the future staffs of our schools. Let us turn now to the concerns of candidates for teaching jobs.

The View from the Candidate's Bridge

After four or more years of college, getting a job is uppermost in students' minds. Typically, the first question teacher candidates ask themselves is, "What do they want?"

Increasingly, school districts are beginning to inquire about the test scores of candidates. Candidates for teaching positions should be prepared to respond to what may be fairly searching questions concerning SAT, National Teacher Examination, or Graduate Record Examination scores. For example, the Chesapeake (Virginia) School District, with 90 applicants for every teaching position, recently articulated some of its yardsticks for hiring:

> Students must have at least a 3.0 average and be recommended by their professor before the district will consider them. . . . The district is looking at expanding its program to other colleges with good teacher education programs and high SAT scores. . . . district personnel look for interest in kids, insight, enthusiasm, creativity, quick thinking, and outstanding knowledge.
> ("First in the Race for the Best Teachers," *Education USA*, February 1985, p. 206)

Clearly, academic achievement is now receiving some attention in the hiring process. The national scare, precipitated by the *A Nation at Risk* report and others, has taken hold and is beginning to influence those who train teachers as well as those who hire them.

Beyond academic competence, the answer to "what do they want?" is being prepared to show what you have. Initially, this is done through paper credentials the candidate presents. Here are some useful guidelines for candidates to observe prior to interviews:

1. Write a well-constructed, brief letter of application. Proofread the document thoroughly to make sure there are no grammatical errors or misspellings.
2. Be sure your enclosed résumé is flawless with respect to fact, form, and flow! Don't worry about such nonsense as the "correct" color – unless, of course, you tend toward the gaudy, in which case, don't!
3. If completing a district application blank is required, do it! Sometimes employers want information not on the résumé. Yes, some application blanks ask you to repeat information already contained in the résumé. Do it anyway!
4. It is better to list references with addresses and telephone numbers in the résumé rather than state the usual "References available on request." This is inefficient since it requires needless subsequent correspondence. It also is annoying to put employers through procedural hoops, when eventually you must supply references anyway.
5. If called for an interview, dress conservatively. Yes, standards for attire on the job have changed for some teachers in some places, but remember that you cannot lose by dressing in accordance with conservative conventions.
6. Be on time. Don't miss the deadline for filing a job application; this could eliminate you from consideration. Lateness for an interview will almost certainly damage your candidacy.
7. Be certain that official transcripts, verification of previous employment, and letters of reference, if required, are on file with the prospective employer. Remember, other candidates want this job, too. If your file is not complete, you may be overlooked.

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8. Do not call to see whether your application or credentials have arrived. First-class mail seldom fails to reach its destination. Also, school personnel offices usually acknowledge receipt of such documents; although some do not.
9. Open a placement file at your college or university. Fill out the forms and have your major reference letters sent there. Keep the file up-to-date. Use that office as a clearing house for submitting all confidential papers to prospective employers. This saves you time; also the time of your references, who, once their letters are in a central file, do not need to send the same letter to several school districts.
10. Do not have separate references or transcripts sent to a school system *before* you have mailed necessary application materials. They may be lost because no application has yet arrived with which to file them.
11. Rehearse your answer to the question "Why me?" because administrators will be asking "Why you?"

When preparing job application materials, candidates should realize that employers are frequently torn between interviewing the risk-free applicant with conventional but solid credentials and the more intriguing applicant with an uncommon background. One should proceed cautiously, however, before projecting unconventional images in one's application materials. Uncommon approaches may very well ring bells in some imaginative administrators' heads; the trouble is that you do not know which heads. Candidates in a conservative line of work like teaching are probably best advised to proceed conservatively.

Credentials: Their Use and Abuse

The United States is a "credential" culture requiring mountainous amounts of paper work. Furthermore, with the engagement of the federal government and the courts in matters of sex equity, affirmative action, and due process, the recruitment, hiring, and dismissal of personnel become complex, frequently entangled, and potentially sticky. Candidates for teaching positions and hiring authorities both would do well to be fully informed of their rights and obligations as set forth in statutory or case law and regulatory mandates, which are legion.

The Importance of Credentials

Credentials are the authentications of one's legal and personal fitness to perform services requiring defined skills in an area of work. In teaching, the state establishes certification standards that, when vouchsafed by competent, designated authority, qualify a person to teach in public elementary and secondary schools. A candidate for a teaching position usually must submit the following to the school district personnel office:

1. Completed application blank for that school system.
2. Official transcripts (carrying the raised college seal) of all undergraduate and graduate work completed with earned grades.

3. Letters of reference from people who know of the candidate's abilities, qualifications, scholarship, and dependability as a worker.
4. Résumés where required or desirable.
5. Written verification of teaching experience from previous places of employment, which could affect the level on the salary schedule when a teacher is initially employed.
6. Copy of teaching certificate, complete with endorsements, for all subjects or areas for which the candidate is licensed; or copy of a letter indicating eligibility for licensing either from a recommending college or university or the teacher certification office in the state department of education.
7. Copies of other documents in which a hiring authority may have legitimate interest.

Compiling all credential material needed to apply for a teaching position is a tedious but necessary task. While not fail-proof, these documents serve as the school district's initial safeguard for keeping the wrong people from contaminating the academic lives of children. Time spent in preparing these materials carefully and skillfully makes a statement about the candidate that will not go unnoticed by the interviewing officer.

Transcripts

Superintendents, in the context of today's academic renaissance, are increasingly reluctant (and should be) to recommend hiring a teacher whose transcript is studded with C's, D's, or WF's (withdrawn-failure). Candidates with good grades, especially in their major field, are singularly welcome in enlightened school systems seeking to attract young people with strong academic preparation.

Good transcripts mean good students and serve as one guarantee that candidates have acceptable mastery of the subjects they are licensed to teach. School personnel staff should scrutinize transcripts to assess a candidate's level of scholarship. This is especially important for candidates preparing to teach in secondary school where they must deal with rigorous academic substance. This is probably less

true for prospective elementary teachers (and our culture may be regretting that).

Application Forms

School districts that have been "burned" by having hired too many individuals who turned out to be poor teachers would do well to review their application forms to see if they elicit truly pertinent information. Well-conceived application forms, if read carefully, can usually yield telling information.

Care must be exercised to ensure against asking *illegal* questions on an application form. Sound advice on this issue for administrators and candidates alike is found in a pamphlet by Janet Little Norton and Victoria Corcoran titled, *Preemployment Inquiries: Avoiding Pitfalls in the Hiring Process* (NOLPE 1984). Some highlights from this document follow:

> The courts generally presume that any information requested in an application is criteria upon which the school district will rely in selecting persons to hire. The key question to ask when examining an application form for unpermissible inquiries is whether the inquiry is job related. (p. 1)

> Four general categories of "inquiries" which should be avoided either on application blanks or at interview concern:
>
> 1. Marital status and family situation
> 2. Personal history disconnected from requirements of the job
> 3. Activities in associations
> 4. Irrelevant information and data on education and history of work (p. 2)

> It is *permissible* to inquire about *outside* business activities only if there exists a *written policy* or statute governing such involvement or, if *after* someone is hired, such activities interfere with performance on the job. (p. 5)

> Questions concerning personal transportation, personal habits such as smoking and drinking and the applicant's current financial status are totally unrelated to qualifications for a job as a teacher, administrator or member of the non-professional staff. (p. 5)

Employment of the handicapped has become a sensitive issue since enactment of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 of the act states that, "no otherwise qualified handicapped individual in the United States shall, solely by reason of handicap, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." Horton and Corcoran go on to comment:

> A handicapped person is "otherwise qualified" with respect to employment, if he or she can, with reasonable accommodation, perform the function of the job in question. Accommodation for the handicapped, such as job restructuring and modification of facilities, is reasonable unless it can be demonstrated that such accommodation would impose undue hardship on a school district. (pp. 6-7)

Another potential legal thicket is the matter of criminal offenses and convictions. Horton and Corcoran comment:

> A school district is required to review the nature of the offense, the date of the offense, and the relationship between it and the position for which the applicant is applying. For example, conviction of theft or embezzlement might appropriately be considered if the applicant is applying for a bookkeeping position or similar job at a school district in which he or she will handle money. (pp. 7-8)

If a school district chooses to inquire about criminal histories of applicants, Horton and Corcoran advise the inclusion of a statement along the following lines with its materials:

> Conviction of a crime is not an automatic bar to employment. The District will consider the nature of the offense, the date of the offense, and the relationship between the offense and the position for which the applicant is applying. (p. 8)

Lastly, it needs to be said that employment decisions may not be based on a person's race, religion, organizational membership, or national origin. And that includes questions about religious affiliation and the frequency of attendance at church.

However burdensome such precautions may seem, administrative personnel could save many wearisome days of tedious work – not

to mention thousands of dollars squandered in needless litigation -- by being alert to legal ramifications of the hiring process.

Proper questions placed in proper contexts on an application form can assist mightily in assessing a candidate's prospective value to a school system. For example, requiring a complete listing of previous employment allows a candidate to present background and experience other than teaching that could be a definite asset to the school system. It also permits hiring authorities to spot shaky work records (changing jobs every year or two without substantial reasons). If there are questions requiring short essay answers, the hiring officer has a sampling of the candidate's thinking and writing skills (or lack of them).

Of course, if a district wants a fuller measure of a candidate's communication skills, it can require a writing sample to accompany the application form. This makes powerfully good sense in a new market requiring a superior breed of teacher!

References

Letters of recommendation have lost the zing of yesteryear. It has become increasingly difficult for prospective employers to distinguish the qualities of one candidate from another, because all too often letters gush mostly praise and platitude. Perhaps an element of intimidation has influenced reference letter writers because of "sunshine" laws and other "freedom of information" entanglements. A more probable explanation rests in the American character of being "a nice guy or gal" and wanting to help prospective job seekers. On the other hand, clear, perhaps even colorful, letters of reference that present an incisive description of candidates' personal and professional qualifications could conceivably propel them into a top ranking among the dozens of faceless applications a personnel officer reviews for a position.

As an antidote to the sterility and sameness of many letters of recommendation as well as to invigorate fact-finding, judicious use of the telephone is necessary. Calling a reference usually yields far more fruitful and precise information. Candidates should be told that their

references may be contaced on the telephone as one more way of "getting to know you."

The suggestions thus far concerning the use of paper credentials are the first phase of recruiting superior teachers. For readers interested in a fuller discussion of the legal aspects of employment, I recommend *Legal Issues in Public School Employment* (Phi Delta Kappa 1983), edited by Joseph Beckham and Perry A. Zirkel, especially chapters 1 to 3. Let us turn now from the paper launch pad of credentials to the face-to-face engagement of interviews.

Getting the Best: The Interview Process

Everybody wants the best. However, close scrutiny of credentials alone will not ensure the hiring of outstanding teachers. People need to see and meet other people in order to make assessments about the "goodness of fit," to borrow the lingo of statisticians. Interviews are the means whereby paper and people meld. The following interview guidelines, excerpted from a policy statement on recruitment in the Rocky Hill, Connecticut, Public Schools, are an example of one school system's approach to recruiting superior teachers.

Conduct of Interviews

It is in the best interests of the school system to conduct interviews of a thorough, searching, open, and frank order. It is the expressed intention of the Board of Education to hire the *best* possible candidate for each position, irrespective of pressures which might operate to favor one candidate over another. The following may be of assistance in conduct of interviews:

- Candidates should have far better than acceptable undergraduate and graduate transcripts. One would, of course, prefer to have every candidate with an outstanding transcript. However, other factors may enter into favorable impressions; and candidates with sound, al-

though not necessarily outstanding, academic achievement should continue to be considered along the interview process.

- Of special significance, however, should be very high achievement in any candidate's area of specialization, e.g., grades in science for a teacher in science.
- The candidate should clearly demonstrate oral mastery of the English language and credentials should be examined for ability to communicate well in writing also.
- Interviewers should not content themselves with superficial questions but probe candidates' detailed knowledge of their teaching field(s) as well as broad general academic background.
- Mastery of methodology and disciplinary techniques should also not be ignored.
- Ability to relate well to students and adults should be determined.
- At all times the candidate should be made to feel comfortable, welcome, and at ease.
- Wherever possible, questions that relate to specific situations at a specific school should be offered to the candidate for reaction.

Pitfalls in the Interview

Teacher candidates expect to be asked questions when being interviewed (except, of course, illegal ones or ones that invade privacy). Unfortunately, candidates are sometimes disappointed, even angered, by such cavalier behavior of the interviewer as the following:

- The interview begins late because the administrator got "tied up."
- Questions asked are ephemeral, strictly procedural, and unchallenging.
- The interviewer spends the greater part of the session lecturing on his/her philosophy of education with no opportunity for rebuttal or exchange.

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- The interviewer fails to read the candidate's application and supporting credentials prior to the interview, and then asks needless questions clearly answered in the paperwork submitted.
- The interviewer is bored with the whole process and shows it.
- Having been asked a basic question about the nature of the teaching assignment, the interviewer apologizes for not knowing exactly what the job entails.
- The interviewer fails to inform the candidate on details of how and when the position will be filled and the method by which successful and unsuccessful candidates will be notified.
- The interview ends on an abrasive "Don't-call-us-we'll-call-you" note, poisoning what might otherwise have been a reciprocally pleasant experience.

Interviewers are well advised to *think* like candidates, anticipating their emotions and tensions, if they wish to recruit *outstanding* people for their schools. If the candidates are truly outstanding, they will surely have multiple offers; their decision may well be based on how they were treated during the interview.

Interview Questions: Elicit the Explicit

Good interviewing, like good teaching, embraces the idea of moving from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the complex. Interviews should allow the candidate opening familiarity – easy responses, perhaps about themselves – and move quickly to more rugged terrain. Regrettably, many interviews never leave easily traversed meadows for the more challenging mountains of intellectual questioning that stretches the candidate.

Opening questions at interviews tend to deal with biographical information and the candidate's aspirations. Such questions have lubrication value; they ease strangers into familiarity. But once a firm footing is in place, such questions should be abandoned quickly.

A different form of questioning forces the candidate to move beyond a textbook or a college classroom where lofty theory abounds and pragmatism may be in short supply. Such questions stretch can-

didates, allowing them to range more widely and the interviewer to compare more intelligently. Examples follow:

- A third-grade student chronically fails to do assignments in the prescribed manner. Conferences with parents have failed to alter the situation. The principal urges you, encouragingly, to "keep trying." Your move.
- You give a pretest that shows you that the map-reading skills of your fourth-graders are appalling. Describe your course of action in detail.
- Writing samples of your new fifth-grade class, which their previous fourth-grade teacher has turned over to you, are riddled with errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. You begin to wonder how much these youngsters were taught last year. Early tests and quizzes confirm your suspicions of a "lost year" last year. What do you do?
- Several parents of students in your third-grade class complain to the principal about the length and complexity of your homework assignments. You review the matter and conclude that the difficulty of the assignments and the time required to complete them are well within school and district guidelines for the age group involved. What do you say to the principal and subsequently do about the assignments – if anything?
- Standardized achievement tests administered in April yield unexpectedly low scores for your current fifth-grade class. The scores are sufficiently low that your colleagues, who also teach sections of fifth-graders, express astonishment. React.

With this level of questioning an interviewer is able to plumb a candidate's ability to *analyze* a problem, to *order* pertinent dimensions of a problem, to *explain* a set of conditions, and to *solve* or *salvage* what is solvable or salvageable. These are qualities we should be looking for if we are really serious about putting superior personnel into American classrooms.

Another level of questioning when interviewing candidates for elementary positions involves queries about content to be taught and how it will be taught. Some examples follow:

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- Explain the sequence you would use to introduce, reinforce, and evaluate students' writing of expository prose in the upper elementary grades.
- What do you regard as minimal competence in knowledge of physical geography for students about to complete the sixth grade?
- How would you explain the concepts of inflation, interest rates, and national debt to sixth-grade students at a level that they understand and that is meaningful for their own futures?
- Teaching method courses often advocate "conceptual" learning. Just what is a concept and how does one teach it? Give an example from a lesson in history.

With this line of questioning, an interviewer has some indication of a candidate's grasp of writing, geography, economics, history, and of how these subjects might be taught. Such questions might seem intimidating to candidates, but employers have a right to know what candidates know and do not know if they are to recruit superior teachers for today's new academic climate.

At the secondary level, questioning of candidates is more likely to focus on maintaining discipline and knowledge of the subject one is licensed to teach. At this level mastery of subject matter is a priority. Enlisting experienced teachers and department heads in the interview process makes good sense at this point. Interviews might even take on the tenor of a master's degree examination.

The Interview from the Candidate's Side of the Desk

Interviews are supposed to be exchanges, not just answering someone else's questions. Ask questions that really matter to you, not ones contrived to sound lofty and encased in education jargon. On the other hand, if the interviewer has done a thorough job, your questions may already have been answered. In which case, say so; then the interviewer can move on to other matters.

In an interview you may have been told to "be yourself." This is sound advice but don't work too hard at it; don't work too hard at

being someone else, either. Watch your speech. You may have picked up some slang expressions while in college that a prospective employer would rather not have as a model for the children you teach.

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A Commitment to Excellence

Schools cannot be what the culture will not permit. To rhapsodize about "excellence" is the surest symptom of business as usual; it will yield only more of the same, more flashy rhetoric. And that is simply not good enough anymore.

Yes, outstanding teachers need outstanding salaries; but above all they need *respect* for what they do, *support* for what they think, *freedom* to be what they are, *opportunity* to participate in the educational enterprise, and the *right* to experiment with new ideas – in short, to make a *difference*! Schools that provide such environments will surely recruit and retain "the best and the brightest" to teach the best children parents are capable of sending.

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